



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Delivered from Chaos
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The Rev. Sharon Gracen

I love baptisms! And I love them on so many levels. The visible part of baptism is the people – often babies who bring such a sense of newness and innocence to what we are doing. That’s kind of the mom in me reacting to baptism – for a short moment, these babies are mine and I love them. When an adult is baptized, there is different experience. I always feel a deep respect for those who chose this path as adults. It is an honor to be a part of that choice.

And then there are the theological reasons for loving baptism. It is one of the most profound things that we do. It is rich in image and metaphor and there is much to understand about what is going on here. A good place to begin is “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep...” That is the description of chaos in the opening words of the book of Genesis. God’s word begins the work of creating order out of this chaos. “Let there be light.” Light is the beginning of order and that light was organized into days and nights and seasons. That begins to feel good when there are things that you can count on...sunrise and sunset, fall colors and crocuses in the spring.

The next place that God applied order was over the waters. Eventually there was dry land, a good place to plant fruit trees and forests. The dry land would become the home of so many creatures, including us. The sea too was full of life but even the most prosaic translation of the Bible refers to that sea life as “monsters.” The water, you see, is still a place of mystery and darkness. The light does not penetrate the water and chaos still lurks beneath the surface. Judeo-Christian history is rife with stories of God saving us from death in the water...Noah saved from the flood, Moses and the Israelites saved from and by the Red Sea, Jonah from the belly of the big fish and then Jesus, the one whom the wind and the waves will obey, submits himself to being put underwater, arising to new life as God’s chosen one. Even the place of chaos is no match for God’s love and for God’s plan.

There is a reason that our church architecture resembles a ship. We are the new ark, the way to begin the human community afresh in every moment. We are meant to be the place that God’s light and love overcomes the darkness and chaos of the world. Our actions, our openness and welcome, our faith and trust in God in the midst of a world gone mad are meant to be a beacon of hope for the future of the world.



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Early last week, I had already decided to use the information that I found in an article by Dr. Douglas Fields, a Department head at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. The article is titled *Rudeness is a Neurotoxin*. Dr. Fields says that "it is helpful to consider, from a biological perspective, what rudeness is, so that we can consider what is lost when formal polite behaviors are cast away." The larger and more complex a society becomes, the more it needs formal, ritualized behaviors. We are talking about manners here and how we talk to and about one another. Dr. Fields says that "strict respect and formal polite discourse is the hub of the wheel in any effective and cohesive social structure...these polite and formalized behaviors reduce stress in a complex society. Stress is a neurotoxin, especially during development of a child's brain."

As I said, I had already planned to share this with you before the Congresswoman from Arizona was shot yesterday along with so many others. I don't need to know who the shooter was or what he was trying to do to know that Dr. Field is right. The stress level in American culture has risen in the last two decades. At first Jerry Springer and Geraldo Rivera were merely annoying cultural blips with their manufactured conflict and people behaving badly for their five minutes of fame. But now, all reality television shows have as a matter of course, contestants finding unkind things to say about each other, enjoying others failure or distress. Rudeness has become the norm and because of that, we are making our children sick. Exposure to verbal abuse, from family or peers is associated with elevated psychiatric symptoms and brain abnormalities. There is a now a generation of young adults who have been raised on a steady diet of emotional chaos through the media.

We as the Church are called to be different. We have been rescued from chaos by God's love and Christ's sacrifice for us. This gift, like all that we have been given, is meant for us to share. Today we are bringing four people through the waters of chaos and into the love of a community that makes extraordinary promises. In our baptismal covenant, we proclaim our willingness to seek and serve Christ in all persons and work for justice, freedom and peace and the dignity of every human being.

I am tired of watching while American culture marches steadily down another path, semi-automatic weapons in hand. We are called to live the Gospel of love and compassion and to show the world that there is another way. The church is not just a pleasant place to come on Sunday morning, it is a community created to help save the world from itself.

Think for a moment, if persistent incivility creates stress in a culture, it is because we have less confidence about how someone will act in any given moment. We become fearful of interacting with those we don't know well. We have no confidence that if we annoy someone, they will respond in a way that is mature and thoughtful. That loss of confidence is an indication that the uncertainty of chaos is growing. It is not healthy for our children, it is not healthy for us.



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The first thing for us to do is to lift up a different culture here within this community. That's not hard here, this is not a congregation embroiled in difficulty. However, we must all be on our guard that we do not perpetrate incivility in our dealings with one another. We can create an atmosphere of emotional security here by being consistent and transparent on our dealings and then we can begin to take it outside of our doors.

Good manners and civility are just like the spiritual disciplines we engaged during Advent. We must practice them, even in the face of someone else's rudeness. We must teach our children the old fashioned kind of manners that will help reestablish some sort of order and begin to beat back the chaos. As a community of faith, we can help with that and rest assured, I intend to talk to our Sunday School about adding this to what we already teach.

I welcome those who will be baptized today with a renewed sense of purpose of what we are offering. It is God's will that order triumphs over chaos, that love is stronger than hatred and fear, and that together, strengthened by our faith we can be a vision of hope by living together as if God's kingdom has already come.